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# The Student-Writer

A Little Talk Every Month with Those  
Interested in the Technique of Literature.

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## SINK OR SWIM

THE Indians are said to have had an effective, if strenuous, method of teaching their male progeny to take care of themselves in the water. The elders, according to the story, wasted no time in coaxing or preliminary training, but tossed the youthful brave far out into the flood. If he did not swim, he must sink. The consequence was that, after getting his mouth and eyes full of water and gulping spasmodically a few times, he struck out for the shore.

It is human nature to develop power to do things we have to do.

This principle is useful to remember when we are trying to write. Now and then a plot bursts into full bloom in the mind of the fiction-writer; but unfortunately, most of us can't afford to wait for these gifts from the ether. We must "go after inspiration with a club," as Jack London expressed it. Lacking a story plot, we must evolve one out of such material as comes to hand—must evolve even the material, if necessary.

There are many methods of doing this. One of them we may call the "sink-or-swim" method, because of its close analogy to the primitive way of giving the young brave confidence in the water.

It consists in taking an interesting character or set of characters and plunging them into a promising situation—in beginning a story before we have one to begin. The writer who employs this method may no more have an idea how the tale is going to come out than the Indian boy can know how he is going to navigate the water; but instinctively he strikes out toward the climactic shore. If he is successful, he has evolved a story.

A pretty big "if." Nevertheless, for the writer of experience, it may prove an effective method of working.

I limit this probability to "the writer of experience" because the plan is not to be recommended for the ordinary novice. He may strike out in perfect confidence but what he produces is unlikely to make a story, because the inexperienced writer has not a sufficiently clear idea of story structure for molding his material into the

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proper form. The practised writer instinctively or by design follows a trend that will introduce suspense, action, logical sequence, surprise, and a climax into the developed tale. If he finds himself unable to attain these things, he comes to a standstill, perhaps; but at least he rejects the innumerable ideas that occur to him which lack the requirements. The novice would be more than likely to accept the first suggestions that come to mind—usually commonplace.

Another advantage in this method for the experienced writer is that it gives him freshness of material. Loss of interest in a theme often results from planning it out too carefully in detail. A complaint frequently heard is this: "I have a good story plot in mind, but I have mulled over the idea so much that it has come to be all cut and dried to me—I've lost interest in it."

Starting with a piquant opening situation and letting the story take its course—within certain limits—has all the zest, from a writer's viewpoint, of exploring a new country, of making new acquaintances, or of reading a story by some other author. The zest is likely to be reflected in a more spontaneous narrative than would have resulted from following a prescribed and familiar outline.

To be sure, the plan also has its drawbacks. The writer who follows it will stumble along many a blind trail, will run against many a stone wall. When he plunges into an opening situation, it is largely a gamble whether he has chosen a "winner" or a "flivver." But with experience he will learn to avoid unpromising leads. If the story does not begin to take form—to show indications of working toward a dimly perceived but real climax—quite soon after the start, it is not likely to materialize into a successful yarn.

The author's attitude toward his story, however, will usually approximate more closely the attitude of his prospective readers when he follows this plan than in any other method of writing, because he is as much in doubt as to the outcome as they are likely to be. The characters are new and full of surprises for him.

Let us, by way of illustration, work out a story plot by the "sink-or-swim" method.

The author is sitting at his desk trying to evolve an idea for a piece of fiction. The harder he thinks, the more amazed he becomes at his own dearth of ideas. "What I need," he reflects, "is a thought-stimulator of some sort—a mental challenge."

He proceeds to go after it. Lacking the plot for a story, he pretends that he has one, and starts in writing it. Since he doesn't know what the story is about, any good starting-place will answer. As a setting for his opening incident, perhaps a country road appeals to him. He may begin to describe it, or he may feel the necessity of putting somebody on the road. A young man in a handsome new roadster will be interesting—say an athletic, well-groomed young man.

This selection, in a sense, casts the die for the story. If a tramp had been chosen, an entirely different story would have resulted.

Now, in order to hold his reader's attention—as well as his own—the author must cause this young man to do something, or to be the object of some action. Action that is unusual and curiosity-arousing would be preferred—action that will provoke the reader's question, "Why?" and cause him to read further.

Several suggestions present themselves, and are rejected. The young man might have a punctured tire, but that, of itself, is commonplace. He might be assailed by a highwayman, but that is old. Why not let him do something utterly inexplicable—like deliberately running his car into a tree or a gatepost?

This arouses interest—stimulates the author to think. He finds himself asking, "Why should a young man do such a thing?"

It is natural to suppose that the reader's curiosity would be similarly aroused. On this assumption, a story beginning is evolved that reads about as follows:

A high-powered roadster drew up at twilight before the substantial stone gateway of the Templeton estates. Its driver showed no disposition to enter the grounds, although the iron gate was swung back on its hinges as if inviting the traveler to leave the highway and enter the cool, shaded drive within. A rank growth of trees almost hid from view the house to which the drive formed an approach, but a glimpse of tiled chimney-tops and a gabled roof conveyed the impression of age and substantialness in the structure.

The man who drove the car was strongly built, with the suggestion of an athlete in the poise of his shoulders. Leaning back, he studied the prospect before him with languid appreciation.

After a few moments, the silence was broken by the sound of a motor getting under way. Instantly alert, the man in the roadster bent forward attentively. The sound came from the direction of the tiled mansion within the grounds.

With calculating eye, the driver of the roadster measured the distance between his car and the gateway. Then, giving the engine all the power it could command, he drove straight at the farthestmost stone pillar.

The author, with this introduction, has thrown himself into the flood. It is a case of either swim to a strong climax or fail, so far as this particular story is concerned. He hasn't any more idea why the young man ran into the post than his reader will have—but he immediately begins to think of possible reasons.

Why should a young man purposely run his car into a gatepost? Undoubtedly, because he wants it to appear that he has met with an accident. Again, why should he desire this? Perhaps in order that he may be carried into the house. A few more paragraphs are added:

As the crash came, the right fender of the car crumpled like a piece of cardboard. The last gasp of the engine was accompanied by the shattering of lamps and windshield.

When the headlights of the approaching machine illuminated the scene, they revealed the man lying face downward a few feet beyond the wreck. One arm was doubled under him, and his head was jammed against a boulder beside the roadway.

The plot thickens! The author has introduced on the scene new characters who evidently are in some way essential to the hero's deep-laid scheme. It is the author's task now to decide who and what they shall be, and why the young man wanted to get into the house.

His object might be burglary. It might be that he wishes to view some treasure that is guarded within the walls of the home. It might be many things. One appealing suggestion is that he wants to get in because he is in love with a girl who lives there. Perhaps he has quarreled with her and, in response to her "I never want to see you again," has told her, heatedly, "And if I'm in my right senses, I'll try never to let you."

Suppose a young man had made such an assertion. He would be likely, on repenting it, to seek some method of putting himself in the girl's way as if by accident, would he not?

But being carried into her home will not get him very far, in the face of such a vow. His pride won't consider relenting toward her merely because a supposed accident has dropped him at her doorstep. He might carry the matter still further by feigning amnesia. Pretending that he does not know the girl, he can begin wooing her again, unhampered by the former vow, which he has supposedly forgotten.

According to the author's pleasure, the fact that the young man is only feigning amnesia could either be disclosed or withheld until the climax.

Should the latter part of the story, as the author approaches it, seem too tame, some new complication could be devised out of thin air, in the same way that the introduction was found. For example, suppose that a highway robbery took place on the night when the young man chose his novel method of obtaining entrance to the house. Suppose that the robbers, being sorely pressed by officers of the law, hid their loot in the automobile which the young man had wrecked by the gatepost. And then suppose that detectives discovered it there.

The predicament of the hero can be imagined. He has committed himself to a pretense of having forgotten who he is. He has destroyed everything that could lead to a discovery of his identity. And now, under suspicion of having committed the robbery, he is in no position to prove that he did not do it. Detectives, watching him

closely, may discover him in some act which proves that he is only feigning loss of memory—which will make matters look all the worse for him.

Surely an exciting climax can be evolved from this material. The girl, very likely, would remain adamant against his new advances, until his arrest for the robbery. Then she could come to the rescue, prove his innocence, forgive him—and perhaps surprise the reader by admitting that she knew from the first that her lover was feigning.

Thus we evolve a plot that could be worked out into a very fair story of its type—all because we plunged boldly into a stimulating situation.

The plan need not necessarily be confined to beginning a story. Sometimes it may prove a help in rescuing a dull story from the gloomy fate that befalls dull stories. Dullness usually results from the obvious. When events begin to transpire just about as the reader anticipates, he commences to yawn and think about going to bed.

Analyze your story; find where these commonplace developments begin; then liven up matters by introducing at those points features that are utterly unexpected—features that you, the author, cannot at first explain. Work out logical explanations for this interpolated material, and you may redeem the tale. Probably, in the process, you will have found it necessary to discard the original ending.

The process followed is largely one of selection and rejection. A development that stimulates the imagination, that brings a gasp or a chuckle to the author's throat, when it occurs to him, that involves something unexpected yet capable of logical explanation, is likely to prove effective in the completed version. As the story evolves, preliminary incidents may have to be discarded. New features may require insertion in the part of the narrative already written. The main thing is to get a start—to evolve a stimulating problem upon which to work.

Once the start is obtained, the process of rolling up a completed story is much the same as that suggested in an earlier article, "Snowballing" a Plot," in which a different method of approach was suggested.

The "sink-or-swim" method is especially suitable for employment in writing tales of mystery and adventure, especially in novellette or book length. In a long story, the author usually need not think about anything in the first half except tangling up the affairs of his characters—and he has plenty of space in which to work out the entanglements in the latter half. Because of the requirements in the matter of unity and quick achievement of effects, it is the safest

plan, particularly for a novice, to map out his plot for a short-story carefully in advance.

If he employs the "sink-or-swim" method, the author can, as it were, give an order for the type of story he wishes to write—can strike the keynote in the opening sentence or paragraph. That keynote is likely to dominate the whole story.

For example, if he desires to write a mystery story, he can immediately strike the mystery keynote by inventing some inexplicable happening. If he desires to write a story of pathos, a pathetic opening scene will practically necessitate events of similar character throughout. If he desires to write an outdoor adventure story, he can immediately visualize for his opening paragraphs some appropriate scene—such, say, as a mountain pass during a blizzard, with men struggling to force their way against the elements.

Imagination and inventive faculty are, of course, essential for following this method. All that can be claimed for it is that it serves as a stimulus for these powers.

*W. E. H.*

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IN order to bring before readers of The Student-Writer in concise form important marketing information as well as the answers to a variety of questions regarding editorial policy that are continually being asked, The Student-Writer has sent out editorial "questionnaires" to a number of representative magazines. The answers have already begun to come in, and will, we believe, prove interesting reading when the symposium is published in the May issue.

Following is an outline of the questions which editors are answering for Student-Writer readers:

About how many manuscripts do you receive in a year?

How many do you publish?

For what proportion of these do you contract with established authors?

About what proportion of unsolicited manuscripts submitted to you are acceptable?

Would a larger proportion be accepted if they were up to your standard?

Does your staff read all the manuscripts submitted?

Do you make a practice of writing personal letters to authors who seem to you worthy of encouragement?

Does a personal letter from you usually mean that the author shows promise of reaching your standard?

Do you find a wide difference between the work of established authors and the general run of unsolicited manuscripts?

From the point of view of your magazine, what are the defects that mark the majority of manuscripts rejected by you?

What are your requirements as to length?

What (if any) type of work is there of which you never can get enough?

Against what themes or types of work are you especially prejudiced?

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